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# The wild deluge of power

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**W**ASHINGTON—How does it happen that the very Reagan team that engineered the stunning 49-state sweep of 1984 is so suddenly and embarrassingly revealed to be playing diplomacy with a 49-card deck?

Robert McFarlane's testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Monday tells exactly how: President Reagan's unique personal and political power was casually delegated to faceless men who then roved the world, speaking in the name of the President without his knowledge and without the knowledge of the secretary of state.

At least this is their current story. It may change tomorrow, but it is so awful that it rings true.

As former national security adviser McFarlane relates the history of the Iran fiasco, he approached Reagan in August 1985, while the President was recovering from cancer surgery, and broached the notion of shipping arms to Iran as a way of improving relations and securing the release of hostages in Lebanon.

To this proposal, the President replied, "Eh." Or maybe "Wozzat?" Or, if you believe McFarlane, "The transfer, indirectly, of weapons to support these individuals (moderate Iranians) and allow them to build a constituency would indeed not be a violation of policy." Somehow, that sounds more like McFarlane than Reagan.

In any case, McFarlane took the President's private, sickbed words as a formal authorization to violate Reagan's own arms embargo on Iran, the Arms Export Control Act, the Export Administration Act and the National Security Act.

According to McFarlane, Attorney General Edwin (Whatever You Say, Chief) Meese ruled that the President's offhand oral approval in August was the equivalent of a written presidential "finding"—which the CIA drafted and the President subsequently signed in January 1986—that would allow the law to be broken in the higher interest of national security.

Reagan delegated his authority to McFarlane. Worse is to come. McFarlane took Reagan's oral approval and he, too, delegated authority. He authorized David Kimche of the Israeli Foreign Ministry to begin U.S. arms deliveries to Iran.

Lt. Col. Oliver North, on the staff of the National Security Council, already had established a clandestine finance and gun-running operation for the Nicaraguan Contra guerrillas. It was easy to use his expertise for the Iran operation as well. Authority was delegated to North.

Why stop there? They didn't. The Reagan administration began to privatize its diplomacy. Talks with an Iranian representative in Rome were carried out by Michael Ledeen, a consultant to the NSC.

This created a problem. Iran wanted proof that it was dealing with a genuine agent of the President, and not just a self-appointed emissary. In the old days, you would have proved Ledeen's credentials by having Voice of America play "Melancholy Baby." Instead, the U.S. shipped antitank missiles.

After Dec. 6, 1985, McFarlane, too, was a private citizen, but his diplomacy continued. In May 1986 he went secretly to Iran, speaking in the name of a President who had chosen to ignore the law.

The White House operatives enlisted retired Air Force Gen. Richard Secord, and he too became a private citizen speaking in the name of the President and in defiance of the law.

North and Secord were able to talk John Kelly, the experienced U.S. ambassador in Beirut, into bypassing Secretary of State Shultz and reporting directly to them, via secret CIA communications channels.

Shultz was shocked. Not only was the policy—trading arms for hostages—perverted, but the process was perverted: Kelly, like everyone else from the President on down, went around his normal chain of command.

The result of this double perversion was that a flawed policy was secretly and privately executed and then exposed to global ridicule.

And who knew? Not Shultz. Not Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. Not Congress. Not even Reagan knew what was being done by the men whom he had authorized to speak and act in his name.

This transcends mere abuse of power. It is a casual squandering of power. I don't believe I've ever seen anything like it. Even Nixon at least knew.